



**Testimony
Betsy Gara, Executive Director
Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the
Education Committee
February 15, 2013**

**RE: HB-6357, AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS OF
THE GOVERNOR CONCERNING EDUCATION**

Given the state's ongoing budget challenges, the Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) applauds Governor Malloy's intent to keep towns whole in this year's proposed budget. Connecticut's small towns and cities continue to face difficult budget circumstances and any cuts in state aid would result in cuts to critical programs, including education. We therefore appreciate Governor Malloy's proposal to target additional funding to the ECS grant and ensure that no town will receive less ECS funding. COST submits the following comments relative to the specific provisions included in HB-6357:

ECS FUNDING

The Governor's proposal increases ECS funding significantly for 30 towns designated as Alliance Districts and provides additional funding for a total of 117 communities. Given the size of the budget deficit, COST is relieved that education funding was not cut and that, as proposed, no town will receive less funding in 2014 and 2015 than it did in 2013.

However, the ECS grant continues to be woefully underfunded by an estimated \$800 million, forcing towns to make difficult decisions about cutting critical educational programs or shifting more of the burden of public education onto property taxpayers. While we recognize that this is not possible to fully fund ECS due to the state's ongoing budget challenges, **Connecticut should begin to develop a long range plan for phasing in increases to the ECS grant with the goal of fully funding the program to provide adequate fair share funding for all towns.**

FOUNDATION LEVEL

COST supports provisions in the bill to increase the foundation level, which is a critical component of the base aid formula, to \$11,754 per student. The increase in the foundation level, which is long overdue, is a positive step in reflecting the actual cost of educating a student although it continues to be below state average per pupil costs.

FREEZING ECS FUNDING LEVELS

Towns may not lose funding under the bill, but by shifting the minimum allocation requirements, HB-6357 freezes funding levels for certain towns. All school districts are struggling to meet a wide range of new mandates within limited resources. Increased requirements to collect data, align curricula with the common core standards, develop more rigorous math and science curricula and beef up graduation requirements are all laudable goals but goals with hefty price tags. In addition, special education costs continue to drive up education budgets across the state, regardless of the relative wealth of a community. COST is therefore concerned about how shifting the minimum allocation requirements will affect the ability of these towns to fund education.

MINIMUM BUDGET REQUIREMENT

COST supports provisions in the bill which allow towns that close schools due to declining enrollment to reduce the Minimum Budget Requirement. This change will help provide some relief to towns who are able looking at consolidating schools to reduce educational costs.

COST is concerned with the following components of the bill:

STUDENT TRANSPORTATION GRANT

HB-6357 eliminates the student transportation grant, which could significantly reduce overall education funding for small towns, many of which must transport students over a wide geographic area. Although the budget, as proposed, offsets the elimination of this grant through the creation of a Hold Harmless grant, we are concerned with how this will ultimately play out in budget negotiations and in future budget years. COST therefore urges lawmakers to consider in budget negotiations how the elimination of this grant will impact education budgets in our small towns.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COMPETITIVENESS GRANT

COST has supported many efforts to encourage greater opportunities for towns to share services to reduce costs and improve efficiencies – this is not one of them. Regionalizing school bus transportation services is not practical for a variety of reasons, including:

- **Bell Times** – Getting kids to school on time is a top priority in school transportation. School districts spend countless hours configuring bus routes to ensure that students arrive on time and are picked up and transported safely home. Bell times vary from school district to school district for a number of reasons – teacher and school personnel contracts, student age, student activities, school size, etc.
- **Safety** – The other top priority in school transportation is safety. In configuring routes, school districts must review the width of streets, the availability of sidewalks, sight lines, speed limits on roads, turnarounds, cul-de-sacs, student ages, special needs students, etc. Attempting to regionalize these services may undermine the safety of our students by not fully considering these factors.

- **School Calendars** – School calendars vary from district to district. Although it may seem simple to regionalize or standardize school calendars, differences in school calendars exist for several reasons. For example, teacher contracts may designate certain days for professional development. Some school districts have implemented early dismissal days or late opening days to give teachers the opportunity to do state mandated data assessment. Other school districts close for certain days because of local events, such as the Durham Fair, or in observance of religious holidays. And, recent weather patterns have resulted in school closures in some towns and not others. To make up for lost days, some schools have revised school calendars, eliminated certain vacation or professional development days to make sure students get more time in classrooms. A standardized school calendar would not have the flexibility needed to address all of these issues.

Unless it can be demonstrated through a thoughtful and comprehensive policy analysis that regional transportation services will provide significant benefit or savings, the state should not push towns to rush headlong into such arrangements.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

We are also concerned that the bill does not address concerns regarding inadequate funding for special education, which is an increasingly unpredictable and costly concern. The local share of special education is almost \$1 billion, accounting for almost 15% of all education spending in Connecticut. Connecticut needs to begin to address this issue to assist towns in meeting their obligation to provide all students with a quality education.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, Connecticut's small towns and cities are committed to providing high quality education for their students. Unfortunately, continued years of flat funding ECS and special education is leaving towns in a position of barely hanging on in terms of meeting their town's educational needs. While we recognize that the state is not in a financial position to fully fund education, we urge you to carefully weigh how these proposals will affect the ability of small towns to fund education.

Thank you for your consideration.